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~ World of Warcraft Leak ~

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->From the Editor's Keyboard  
"\*\*\*\*\*"

"Saying it like it is!"

Finally, a terrific week, weather-wise! Sure, it was hot for a couple of days, but that's acceptable here in Mew England! At last, summer has arrived! Sure, it's late in the season for it to happen, but it had to appear sooner or later! It's nice to be able to get outside and watch the dogs run around or bask in the sun. Heck, it's even nice to be able to work out in the yard for a change too.

But, in order to enjoy the weather, one needs the time to do so. Not so for me this week; I have/had one day off this week - Wednesday. Turned out that was the day for me to run around to get things done, and then try to enjoy what little time was left in the day - which I managed to do. It's been a long week at work, again. Long days or nights - it's tough to do now that I'm older. But, we have to do things these days that we might not have done years ago, or when we were younger. With the economy the way it is, every little bit helps. So, suck it up I must.

So, while I enjoy the last few hours of daylight on this nice Friday evening, so I'll let you all move on to this week's issue! Now seems to be a great time to take the dogs out for a last run!

Until next time...

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PEOPLE ARE TALKING  
compiled by Joe Mirando  
joe@atarinews.org

Hidi ho friends and neighbors. I want to talk a bit about the sorry state of the NewsGroup, but there's something I want to mention first.

I want to give a big shout-out to President Obama, or whichever of his aides that reads my column.

Last week, I mentioned (again) that we don't need healthcare reform, but healthcare INSURANCE reform. The column appeared on Friday evening on the Internet, and on the following Wednesday, at one of his 'town hall

meetings' President Obama decided to change the name of this huge initiative of his. It's no longer "healthcare reform" as he had been calling it. That Wednesday afternoon he began calling it... wait for it... wait for it...

#### INSURANCE REFORM!

Hey, I know it's probably just a big coincidence, but let's face it; how many times do people like you and me get to say that we've had an idea that the President actually used... and be able to prove it? Well, this is my moment in the sun. Let me enjoy it for a bit.

Well, another week has come and gone almost unnoticed in the NewsGroup, and I'm really starting to despair. I mean, heck, it's been three weeks or so since there were enough messages on the UseNet to put in the column. This isn't a good sign. I fear that with AT&T's dropping its news server and no new services on the horizon, it's only going to get harder and harder for people like you and I to access the NewsGroups. Harder is NOT better. That's what I've been railing against since the early days of CompuServe. I can remember when things started out 'equal' in the computer world. Remember when it didn't matter if you had an IBM PC, an Apple ][, TI-99/4A, Commodore64, Atari 400 or a Coleco ADAM? We all had ways of getting online and accessing CompuServe... and Delphi... and then GENie and then National VideoTex? It was all one big digital party and we were all invited.

Then CompuServe decided they wanted to run their service not with a mainframe or even a mini, but with a handful of desktop PCs with 90 MHz Pentium Pro processors. Of course, this meant that they had to find a way of getting OUR computers to do more of the work. That meant they had to write special software for us to use, and THAT meant that if they were going to support all of us, they would have to write a different version for each operating system. Of course, they didn't want to do that. So they settled, of course, on writing software for the PC... leaving the rest of us twisting in the wind. We all disliked it, of course, but CompuServe was adamant: If you wanted to use CompuServe, you had to go out and buy an "IBM compatible" PC.

Well, I wouldn't do that, so I just used Delphi, GENie and NVN... Until NVN closed its doors, GENie changed its format to something unrecognizable, and Delphi went Web-portal.

Of course, this was just after that "world-wide web" thing picked up in popularity, and it wasn't TOO long before someone had written a TCP/IP stack for the Atari ST. So I took the plunge and used my former online communities as connections to the internet.

Now, if you've been reading my columns for a while, you know that I'm not a big fan of Bill Gates. But I often wonder just what the computing world would look like if it hadn't been for his offerings. Oh, I think computers would still be a huge part of our lives, but I don't know how what we not think of as "the internet" would look, or if we'd have some of the whiz-bang things we now enjoy.

I still don't like the guy or his company, but I've got to give credit where credit is due. He not only took advantage of the trends he saw coming, he actually shaped those trends. How many people can you say THAT about?

Well, that's it for this time around. Tune in again next week, same time,

PEOPLE ARE TALKING

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->In This Week's Gaming Section    - 'WoW' Expansion Leaked?
   " " " " " " " " " " " " " " " " Madden NFL 10 Best Yet!
                                     Forza Motorsport 3!
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Athlete and stadium models that looked great last year jump off the

screen with improved lighting effects and the addition of depth of field, which blurs out the background to make the foreground appear more vibrant.

Players can customize their team's game day look using pieces from home, away, alternate and classic uniforms, and the game's TV-like production is enhanced with varied camera angles between plays and on kickoffs.

Game play doesn't undergo a drastic overhaul from "09" - and that's a good thing - as the developers at EA's Tiburon studio polished and revamped a ton of on-field animations, especially with tackling.

Running backs fight to stay upright and keep their feet moving to fight for a couple extra yards. Defenders dive low to trip up a receiver trying to eke out extra yards on a cross route.

The game added gang tackles, and up to nine players can push a pile back behind the scrimmage line or toward the first-down marker. Refs even blow a play dead when an upright pile stops forward progress without falling.

A new mini-game adds interactivity to fumbles, letting players mash buttons to fight for the ball in a pileup. This could get annoying if it happened on every loose ball, but it's used sparingly when appropriate.

Another new feature is the controller will rumble when a rusher nears the quarterback, allowing those with pocket presence to scramble to keep a play alive. And unlike previous "Madden" versions in which the passer was either sacked or got the throw off, a clutched quarterback can inadvertently slam a ball into the ground or toss a lob that's up for grabs by lumbering linemen.

Reception animations look more realistic, even on replay, and I even pulled off a David Tyree-style helmet catch in the end zone during a brief Super Bowl moment.

EA Sports has long used the "It's in the game" tag line for its games, and the phrase definitely applies here.

Zebras consult on whether a ball carrier crossed the goal line and will call for the chain gang on questionable first-down conversions. Coaches berate quarterbacks after a careless interception and shake hands and chat with their rivals after the game.

You'll also hear considerably more player chatter, fan rants and crowd chants.

The game's incredible online Franchise Mode is back, letting Internet-connected players form leagues, conduct drafts and compete while managing rosters and transactions through a Web browser. A new two-player online co-op mode provides a way for friends to team up.

Frankly, it's a struggle to come up with criticisms for "Madden NFL 10," but even the 16-0 New England Patriots lost a Super Bowl - so here are a few.

The computer always seems to be able to pull off a play that I can't do, but maybe it's my lack of talent since I've been whining about that since "Madden NFL 94." And there'll always be that occasional weird animation, such as a 360-degree arm movement that surely should have

brought out the injury cart.

What else? Well, those sideline photographers wearing the red NFL vests don't follow the ball carrier with their lenses.

The attention to detail in "Madden NFL 10" is astounding, and it's almost worth giving others the controls for a game or two and just sit back and take in all the visuals.

Four stars.

While EA stepped up the realism for the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3 "Madden" versions, it further pushed its Wii version (\$49.99) away from a sim into a family friendly arcade game.

After going after the casual gaming crowd last year by adding an optional simplified control scheme, EA further diverged here with a new visual style that puts exaggerated weight-room-happy linemen alongside tall lanky receivers and defensive backs.

As expected, the graphics come nowhere near its big brother, but the game is fast and fun, and the Wii's motion controls make it more interactive.

Three stars.

### 'Forza Motorsport 3' for Xbox 360 Is Revving Up

The next installment of Microsoft's flagship racing franchise won't offer any clunkers.

When "Forza Motorsport 3" is released for the Xbox 360 in October, the latest edition of the popular driving simulator will feature hundreds of high-end cars. Since debuting on the original Xbox in 2005, the "Forza" games have thrust players inside virtual vehicles meticulously modeled after real rides, a painstaking process created by developer Turn 10 Studios.

"We put our hands on every car," said content director John Wendl.

The racing sequel will include over 400 automobiles, about 100 of which have never been parked in a "Forza" game. Several sport utility vehicles and classic muscle cars have been added, as well as 2010 models like the Fiat 500 Abarth SS and Audi R8. Wendl said the game's customization system would let players pimp out even the meekest of rides.

"You can do full engines swaps, along with suspension, brakes and all these other things that make the car way more high performance," Wendl said. "You can get a Honda Fit to a point where it's putting out close to a 1,000 horsepower, generating downforce and it's got racing slicks on it. It will beat up on a lot of cars in the game."

The third "Forza" game boasts over 100 tracks, from actual circuits such as France's Le Mans and Spain's Catalunya to fantasy tracks carved into the terrain of Italy's rugged Amalfi Coast and Spain's mountainous Montserrat region. Wendl said the real-world locales are copied "inch perfect" to their counterparts, but they're not as fun as the

make-believe courses.

"Real race tracks tend not to be as visually interesting to look at because they're designed to be very safe," said Wendl. "They're designed for spectators, but we're in a video game. We don't have to worry about anybody getting hurt, so when we create fictional environments, we can build them to be visually dramatic and really fun to drive."

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A-ONE's Headline News  
The Latest in Computer Technology News  
Compiled by: Dana P. Jacobson

Public Spied on 1,500 Times A Day in UK, Study Finds

Police, councils and the intelligence services made more than 500,000 requests to access private emails and telephone records in the UK last year, according to an annual surveillance report.

The figures, compiled by the Interception of Communications Commissioner, Paul Kennedy, found that about 1,500 surveillance requests were made every day in Britain.

That is the annual equivalent to one in every 78 people being targeted. It included 1,500 approved applications from local councils.

Each request allows public bodies to access data - which includes telephone records, email and text message traffic - but not the actual content of conversations or messages.

"It doesn't allow you to see the content of the message or conversation. It's about the who, where and when - the time element essentially in directed surveillance," a Home Office spokesman said.

Although slightly down on last year, the total is up more than 40 percent on two years ago.

The Liberal Democrats' home affairs spokesman Chris Huhne seized on the figures, saying they "beggared belief," warning that the UK appeared to have "sleepwalked into a surveillance state."

"Many of these operations carried out by the police and security services are necessary, but the sheer numbers are daunting," he said.

"It cannot be a justified response to the problems we face in this country that the state is spying on half a million people a year," Huhne said.

"The government forgets that George Orwell's 1984 was a warning and not a blueprint," he said.

The Liberal Democrats say only a magistrate should be able to approve a

request for surveillance, under the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (RIPA).

The act was introduced in 2000, to take account of technological change. It was extended in 2003 by the home secretary at the time, David Blunkett, to tackle serious crimes including terrorism.

In his report, Kennedy also found 595 errors in interception requests last year, including mistakes made by the domestic and foreign intelligence agencies, MI5 and MI6.

The vast majority of requests to snoop on people's records were made by the police and security services.

But the report found that some were granted to council officials investigating trivial offences like dog fouling, fuelling concern that the act is being misused.

#### E-mails from Public Overload House Web Site

Amid a boisterous debate on health care reform, people flooded members of Congress on Thursday with so many e-mails that they overloaded the House's primary Web site.

Technical support issued a warning to congressional staff that the site, <http://www.house.gov>, may be slow or unresponsive because of the large volume of e-mail being sent to members.

Jeff Ventura, a spokesman for the House's chief administrative officer, which maintains the Web site, said traffic data was not available and could not be released without the lawmakers' consent.

"It is clearly health care reform," Ventura said. "There's no doubt about it."

Lawmakers are in their home districts for the August recess, where a populist backlash has emerged in some quarters against President Barack Obama's plan to overhaul the nation's health care system.

A spokesman for Rep. Joe Barton, a Texas Republican, said e-mail traffic related to health care has exploded in recent weeks.

Sean Brown said the office has received 2,761 e-mails on the subject since the debate heated up five weeks ago. In the five weeks before that, the office received 368 health care-related e-mails. He estimated that 90 to 95 percent of the e-mails were opposed to Obama's plan.

Democrats are trying desperately to regain control of the debate, with the White House posting a new Web site designed to dispel what it called "the misinformation and baseless smears that are cropping up daily." House Democratic aides have set up a health care war room out of Majority Leader Steny Hoyer's office. It is designed to help lawmakers answer questions about the legislation.

Ventura said the last time he saw such a significant slowdown in the system was in January, shortly before the House passed an \$819 billion bill to stimulate the economy.



Ventura said new technology called "load balancing" is in place to try to handle spikes in volume. So far, the House Web site remains available to the public.

In particular, people are heavily using a link on the site called "Write Your Representative," which helps a voter track down their representative by plugging in their ZIP code.

### Microsoft Should Follow Apple's Lead on Windows 7 Pricing

Apple's upcoming Snow Leopard upgrade currently occupies two of the three top spots on Amazon's software top seller list. The pre-sale prices are \$29 for a single computer and \$49 for a 5-user family pack.

Microsoft occupied the same two spots last month when it was pre-selling the Windows 7 Home Premium edition upgrade for \$50 and the Professional edition for \$100.

There's a profound difference between the \$29 Apple is charging, and Microsoft's \$50 offer: Apple's price won't expire.

That same Windows 7 Home Premium upgrade will now set you back a solid \$120. While one might ask why Microsoft would need to lower its prices when its current prices are more aggressive than what they asked for Vista. I have the answer; Consumer's expectations have changed.

People now expect to be able to buy netbooks for \$300, notebooks for \$500 and premium desktops for a few hundred more.

For the person running XP on a \$300 netbook, spending an additional \$120 for Windows 7 is exorbitant. Ditto for the person who bought a laptop running Vista two years ago. Many people would rather put that money toward their next computer purchase that will be much more powerful than they already have.

A person could argue that regardless of whether people buy Windows 7 upgrade or just buy a new computer, Microsoft sells an OS. This is technically true, but MS has to be much more aggressive with its pricing for OEMs than consumers. It is much happier to sell you an upgrade to your existing computer where they pocket more cash.

Microsoft is smart to sell a family pack for \$150. This allows users to update up to three computers to Windows 7 Home Premium. This makes sense for households and small businesses that actually own three computers. However, there is a huge market for people that only own a single computer that is powerful enough to run Windows 7.

For the chunk of change that Microsoft is asking, these folks might just continue using XP or Vista, which still work fine for the overwhelming majority of computing tasks.

Microsoft is touting freshly-launched Internet Explorer 8 as its champion in the competitive Web browser arena, urging holdouts to upgrade from earlier versions of the software.

IE 8 has been catching on since its release five months ago, but Microsoft is hoping to leave behind aging IE 6 as well as much-maligned Vista after Windows 7 operating system launches in October.

Despite being released nine years ago, IE 6 still claims 27.2 percent of the browser market, according to figures released in July by Net Applications.

"The reason to still be on IE 6 at this point is lack of awareness, or the 'good-enough' problem that people are satisfied with what they are using," said Amy Barzdukas, general manager of IE and consumer security at Microsoft.

"Particularly in this economy, it is difficult to be cavalier and just say update to IE 8."

Schools, hospitals and other cash-strapped operations could be daunted by the cost of upgrading computer systems to new software.

IE 6 also tends to be used with pirated versions of Windows XP operating system because newer software is better designed to expose illegitimate copies, according to Barzdukas.

Microsoft reports seeing more XP use in emerging economies such as Brazil and India where piracy rates are higher than in the United States.

A drawback to people sticking with IE 6 is that Microsoft's image can be maligned by software deficiencies that have been fixed in newer versions," according to Barzdukas.

"People can get frustrated with that experience and say Microsoft stinks, or IE stinks, and base that perception on technology released ten years ago," Barzdukas told AFP during a visit this week to San Francisco.

"We want them to experience the latest."

Microsoft on Thursday released NSS Labs research indicating that IE 8 excels at blocking phishing and malware attacks.

In Microsoft-sponsored testing at a Texas lab, NSS found that IE 8 and an open-source Firefox browser from Mozilla tied for first place when it came to catching "social-engineering" phishing attacks.

"Internet Explorer 8 and Firefox 3 were the most consistent in the high level of protection they offered," the NSS study said.

When it came to blocking malicious software, malware, IE 8 caught 81 percent of the "live threats" as compared with the 54-percent finish by the second-place Firefox browser.

"I think our biggest area of concern in terms of competition is getting people onto a modern browser and protecting people from the bad guys," Barzdukas said.

"We don't spend a lot of time worrying about what the other browsers of

doing."

Google leapt into the browser wars last year with Chrome software that industry insiders suspect will mesh with a new operating system the California Internet powerhouse plans to launch in 2010.

Apple has long challenged Microsoft with operating systems and other software customized for Macintosh computers. Mozilla's free Firefox web browsers based on open-source software have been gaining fans.

Barzdukas said her team is "juiced" by competition in the browser market.

"I think we have a great opportunity for the industry to evolve what the browser is able to do," Barzdukas said.

"IE is still the most broadly used browser in the world; we will continue to evolve. We are focused and here to play."

Microsoft this month abandoned a plan to strip IE 8 from versions of Windows 7 shipped to the European Union.

Microsoft said it will instead present customers with a "ballot" option, allowing them to choose whether to install IE or another browser.

Microsoft said the option had been tentatively welcomed by the European Commission, and received positive feedback from computer makers.

The Brussels-based EU executive, which wields broad anti-trust powers, had called on Microsoft to open Windows to different Internet browsers in order to fend off litigation.

### Opera 10 Beta 3 Now Available

Before Firefox, before Internet Explorer, there was Opera. Okay, it's not the /oldest/ graphical web client (Mosaic was before it), but it's the oldest one that's still around. It's also one of the most prolific, with browsers on the Wii and Nintendo DS along with excellent versions for mobile phones. Now up to version 9.64, the Norwegians at Opera Software have been hard at work on Opera 10.

Now you can download and try out Opera 10 beta 3. According to the Opera site, there have been several major improvements in beta 3:

**\*Tab tweaks\*** Multiple Opera users who tested the previous betas shared their preferences for more visual tab options. Opera has responded in beta 3 by offering options for tab placement. Now users can view their visual thumbnail tabs on the right or left side of the screen, in addition to placement options on the top or bottom. Visual Tabs are resizable and the thumbnail view is optional.

**\*Eyes on the UI\*** Designer Jon Hicks continues his renovation of the user interface (UI) by implementing several new tweaks designed to make using Opera even more efficient.

**\*Multilingual\*** With a whopping total of 38 languages, Opera's beta 3 aims to make it easier for users around the world to feel more at home while online.

\*Crash prevention\* Opera's integrated crash logger has made beta 3 a rock-solid ride.

\*Even more Turbo\* Opera Turbo has been further refined for increased speed when browsing over slow network connections.

You can download Opera 10 beta 3 from <http://www.opera.com/browser/next/>. This browser is often overlooked in favor of Firefox or Chrome, but it really is quite good and worth checking out.

#### Marc Andreessen Backs RockMelt Browser Venture

Marc Andreessen is throwing down the browser gauntlet once again. Fifteen years after he launched what was then the dominant Web browser, the venture capitalist is investing in what could be the next browser to make a buzz on the World Wide Web.

The inventor of the Netscape Internet browser is investing in a startup called RockMelt. The company is building a new Internet browser to join a market where Microsoft Internet Explorer reigns supreme, Firefox is gaining ground, and new players like Google Chrome are looking for an opportunity.

"Does the world really need another browser?" asked Michael Gartenberg, a vice president at Interpret. "It's starting to feel like 1999 all over again with browser wars and new versions of browsers."

According to a report in The New York Times, Andreessen thinks RockMelt could come up with a new browser that is different from what's available today. "There are all kinds of things that you would do differently if you are building a browser from scratch," Andreessen told the Times. Nothing more is known. RockMelt's Web site merely invites people to sign up for updates.

"Mark Andreessen is a person with a pretty deep history of browsing experience," Gartenberg said. "If RockMelt has piqued his interest, perhaps there's some sort of story to be told here that hasn't been told before. But at this point the idea of yet another browser coming into the market is going to be challenging."

Challenging because the browser industry has already made the shift from focusing on features to focusing on speed. Gartenberg isn't sure what twist RockMelt might introduce that would shift browsers forward, since consumers seem satisfied with the speed of today's browsers.

"With all the new browsers we've seen, the browser is not the bottleneck. If you have to start measuring things with a stopwatch, then you are not gaining all that much more benefit from a speed perspective," Gartenberg said. "It's definitely hard to imagine consumers looking for another browsing experience. It would have to be something very, very different in order for it to have an impact."

Andreessen teamed with Ben Horowitz, his Netscape colleague, to form Andreessen Horowitz in July. The firm's first fund totals \$300 million. It isn't clear how much of that was invested in RockMelt, but the firm was founded to make investments ranging from \$50,000 to \$50 million.

Andreessen Horowitz described a "new philosophical approach" to venture-capital investing: Rather than being bound by tight restrictions on investment size or stage focus, the firm is open to committing any amount, up to \$50 million, at various stages of a company's life.

The firm focuses on investing in startups in the technology sector, including consumer Internet companies, cloud computing, networking, enterprise applications, and social-media businesses. Andreessen and Horowitz may take board seats in their portfolio companies.

Andreessen and Horowitz are no strangers to investing in startups. Since 2004, they have acted as angel investors for more than 45 companies, including Aliph (Jawbone), ExtraHop, LinkedIn and Twitter.

### Paypal 'Clarifies' New Fees

Hearing the anger over new fees introduced months ago with minimal notification, Paypal is now looking to set the record straight.

In an official blog post, director of product marketing Heinz Waelchli explains the reasoning behind what anyone who happened upon Paypal's terms of service since mid-June has known: If you have a Personal account, you'll pay a fee of 2.9 percent, plus 30 cents, to get transfers from other Paypal accounts filed as "Goods" or "Services."

Money transfers to friends and family are free, even for people with Premium accounts. This is what Paypal focused on when announcing the changes to its service, staying relatively quiet on the new fees for Personal account holders.

The issue isn't so much the added cost, but the lack of notice. After speaking to other Paypal users, I know I'm not the only one who didn't spot the changes until I saw the money coming out of my incoming funds.

Waelchli said an e-mail went out "to all customers who asked to receive this information," so I guess I must have clicked a box that said "Please don't tell me when you intend to charge me more money, but definitely tell me about all the great new services you're offering."

What really seemed to rile people up after the original story was a quote from Paypal PR Manager Charlotte Hill: "We didn't want to make a huge formal communication out of this pricing change, because we weren't really adding any fees, and we were hoping it would be a more useful experience for people," she said.

I think what Hill meant was because Paypal had eliminated friends and family transfer fees for Premium accounts, but added goods and services fees for Personal accounts, the sum total was nothing additional (never mind that Paypal made a big to-do about one of those changes, but not the other).

Whether Hill's logic is flawed or just straight-up PR spin, the point remains that every Paypal customer, or at least every Personal account holder, should have been clearly notified of the changes, without the marketing hype. I hope for Paypal that it's a lesson learned.

## Microsoft To Appeal Word Patent Ruling

Microsoft said Wednesday it plans to appeal a ruling by a Texas judge that would ban the US software giant from selling its popular Word program in the United States.

US District Court judge Leonard Davis ruled on Tuesday that Word violates an XML patent held by a Canadian company, Toronto-based i4i, and ordered Microsoft to pay more than 290 million dollars in damages and interest.

He also issued an injunction, which takes effect in 60 days, that would bar Microsoft from selling Word products that include the patented technology.

A Microsoft spokesperson, Kevin Kutz, said the Redmond, Washington-based company planned to appeal.

"We are disappointed by the court's ruling," Kutz said in a statement. "We believe the evidence clearly demonstrated that we do not infringe and that the i4i patent is invalid.

"We will appeal the verdict."

Microsoft was accused by i4i of infringing on a 1998 XML patent in its Word 2003 and Word 2007 programs.

Word uses the XML language to open .XML, .DOCX, and .DOCM files.

## Password Management Eases With Net Storage

Do you use your kids' names? Your pet's? Your favorite color? We all use some dumb passwords that are too easy to guess.

Worse, we use the same ones for lots of Web sites. So if one site gets compromised, or an employee there is dishonest, someone could start trying out that password on other sites where you have accounts, like Amazon or PayPal, and you've got trouble.

Browsers help out a bit by offering to remember your passwords, but that does little good if you are on a different computer or want to try a different browser.

The rescue comes from password-management programs. A couple of them have recently taken a big step forward in ease of use, by storing your login information online so that you can access them from multiple computers. Online storage does raise some questions about security, but it also makes these little-known programs worth another look.

I've used one called Roboform for more than four years. Like a browser, it stores passwords on your computer, encrypting them so that they're revealed only when you type in a master password. It fills out the login forms on a Web page automatically. It also stores your address, credit card number and other personal data, so you don't have to type them in

when you shop online. Because it's independent of the browser, you can access the same passwords as you switch between Firefox and Internet Explorer.

With Roboform, I have been able to take those passwords to another computer, but it's been a bit of a hassle. If I signed up for a new Web site on one computer, I had to manually copy the Roboform file that contained the username and password to the other two computers I use regularly.

A free update to Roboform, released last week, takes care of this problem by storing the passwords not only on the computer, but also in an online locker provided by the publisher, Siber Systems Inc. Every time you create a new password, Roboform stores it, in encrypted form, in your online locker. When you log in to another computer, the password is automatically copied over from the locker.

The system is still cumbersome. You have to install an extra piece of software called GoodSync on each computer you need to synchronize. If too many passwords have changed since the last synchronization, GoodSync pops up and asks you to manually approve the changes. The choices are difficult to understand.

In providing an online storage option, Roboform is catching up to a new password management program, LastPass, that's designed from the ground up to store passwords online. Trying that, I found it slightly easier to use - at least, it didn't confront me with cryptic dialog boxes. It also has the virtue of being free, while Roboform costs \$30.

Both programs work in Internet Explorer and Firefox on Windows-based computers, but if you go beyond that, LastPass has the edge in compatibility.

Roboform doesn't work on Macs at all, though Siber says it is working on a plug-in for the Safari browser on the Mac. You can access your Roboform Online locker as a Web site on a Mac with any browser, but it won't help you create new passwords or fill existing ones into Web pages. This is at best a stopgap measure for occasional Mac use.

LastPass works with Firefox on the Mac, and the company says it is working on a Safari plug-in. LastPass also has a more effective stopgap measure for other browsers, both on Windows and Macs, in the shape of "bookmarklets" that will fill in passwords even if there's no compatible plug-in.

One thing worried me about LastPass: It's designed to store your passwords online. While I'm reasonably comfortable that they're safe from theft there, what if LastPass' Web site goes down because of a hacker attack, or worse, because the company goes out of business? Do you lose the keys to your online life?

No, it turns out that LastPass also stores the passwords on your computer, where they're accessible through the browser. You won't be able to change or update them if LastPass' servers are down, but at least they're there.

Neither Roboform nor LastPass is a complete answer to online security, of course. You could still be duped into entering a password on a fake "phishing" site set up to look like your bank's. And if someone gets hold of your master password, that person can get all your passwords in

one swoop from your online locker. In that sense, online storage of the passwords is riskier than having them on your computer.

But even if there are risks to using these programs, they're better than using the same password for all sites. It's probably also safer than writing down all your passwords on paper and carrying them around with you.

If we accept online password storage as safe and reliable, then these password managers are probably just a stepping stone to a more comprehensive, Internet-wide identity management system. The long-frustrated idea there is that one "ID card" that you store online would be legible by all Web sites, and your password tells a site that that ID card belongs to you.

Microsoft Corp. has tried to get sites on board with this model for more than a decade and has accumulated criticism for security flaws along the way. Now, however, there's some momentum behind a system called OpenID that just might make programs like LastPass and Roboform unnecessary. Most of the big Web companies, including Microsoft and Google Inc., support OpenID.

I wouldn't hold my breath, though. In the meantime, Roboform Online and LastPass both do a good job. Since LastPass is free and has the edge on browser and Mac compatibility, it should probably be your first pick.

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